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# THE LITERARY DISCIPLINE—II

BY JOHN ERSKINE

## ORIGINALITY IN LITERATURE

### I

IF we accept the doctrine of criticism today, originality is a great virtue in a writer, and if we believe the book advertisements, all the new writers as they appear, and as they reappear, have this virtue to a striking, even to an explosive extent. But with all their originality, some of the new books turn out to be dull, and if we reconsider for a moment the books men have finally judged great, we observe that they were rather destitute of the kind of originality we talk of nowadays.

“In poetry, a new cadence means a new idea,” wrote the imagist some time ago, defending the use of free verse. The doctrine was in the interest of the cadence, but it implied something larger and more significant, that in poetry newness of ideas is desirable. More recently, an American critic remarked, in effect, that what Lytton Strachey has accomplished in his literary portraits is nothing but what Gamaliel Bradford accomplished in his, and since Mr. Bradford’s portraits came first, they should have the credit and the praise which an indiscriminating world bestows on Mr. Strachey’s. If the question of priority is raised in this kind of writing, perhaps something should be said for Plutarch; but are we sure we should raise the question of priority? What arrests us in the remark of the American critic is the undebated assumption that literary excellence derives from doing something before somebody else does it. Is it the business of art to discover new ideas, or indeed to busy itself much with any ideas, as separated from emotion and the other elements of complete experience? Is it the originality of genius in art to say something no one has ever thought of before, or to say something we all recognize as important and true? As for the mere question of

priority, even stupid things have been said for a first time; do we wear the laurel for being the first to say them?

One suspects that the new cadence will persist in poetry only if we like it, and that Mr. Bradford's reputation will outstrip Mr. Strachey's only if we prefer what he wrote, and if by chance we care for neither, then both will be neglected, though one preceded the other by a hundred years. Excellence is the only originality that art considers. They understand these things better in France. There the young poet even of the most radical school will respect the bias of art towards continuity rather than toward novelty, toward the climax of a tradition rather than its beginning; his formula of self-confidence will be, "Victor Hugo was a great poet, Alfred de Musset was a great poet, and now at last I'm here." But in America the parallel gospel is, "Poor Tennyson couldn't write, nor Longfellow, of course; now for the first time let's have some poetry."

The writers finally judged great, so far from sharing our present concern for originality, would probably not even understand it. What is the object of literature? they would ask. Of course, if it is to portray the individual rather than human nature, or those aspects of life which stand apart from life in general, then each book may have something queer in it, something not in any other book and in that sense original; but then the reader, before long, will be looking for peculiarity in every book he buys—it must be, not better, but "different", to use an American term in æsthetics; and the writer then who would meet this demand for the peculiar must make a fresh start with every book. What bad luck, they would say, to be forever a primitive, to be condemned, after every success, to produce something in another vein, the first of its kind. Originality in this sense will be continually undermined by fame, for the more an author is read, and the more people become accustomed to his world, the less he will seem original. On the other hand, if the reader looks for originality, there will be no fame, for no matter how popular an author is, we shall read his book only once, and then be ready for his next novelty.

But if the object of literature is still, as it was for the great writers, to portray human nature, then the only new thing the

artist will look for is a greater success in his art. Human nature is old and unchangeable; he will hope to make a better portrait than has yet been made—better, at any rate, for his own people and his own age, and if possible better absolutely. There is nothing new about religion or love or friendship, war, sunsets, the sea, danger or death, yet something remains to be told of each eternal theme, and when a book comes which tells the whole, which satisfies some hitherto unexpressed yearnings or defines more sharply something hitherto half-seen, then that portrait of human nature serves our purposes until we have a still finer, and other versions meanwhile are neglected and forgotten. We remember how many accounts of Romeo and Juliet there were before Shakespeare told the story to suit us, and how many records of the journey to hell before Dante told us the whole truth of that pilgrimage; perhaps we know the many desperate attempts, long since mercifully swallowed up in oblivion, to portray the American Indian before Fenimore Cooper made the picture the world wanted. The achievements of literature are all, as in these instances, a gradual reworking of traditional or popular or folk material, and in the process it is precisely because the subject is not original that the audience can decide how well it has been portrayed. A sequence of writers interpreting life are therefore like a succession of virtuosos playing the classics, each trying to give us the true Bach, Beethoven, Chopin, Schumann. Their renderings will be different enough, but the music is the same, and we know it by heart. The player who calls our attention to most beauty in it, will be original or unique in the only way that art permits.

The example of the musician may not seem to all writers a fair parallel; they may protest that the writer creates, as the composer does, but the player only interprets what is already created. But they are wrong, and the parallel is correct. The writer does not create as the composer does. Music is an ultimate pleasure in itself, like the taste of sugar; so long as it delights us, we do not ask what it means. Moreover, since there is no question of its meaning, we may not need a previous experience to find some enjoyment in it; it may be satisfactory at first contact. Of course every art gives a more subtle pleasure as we become practised in appreciating it, yet the contrast between music and literature

remains a real one, since without any knowledge of life at all men and even children often penetrate deeply into the heart of music, but without some knowledge of life they are stopped at the very threshold of literature. The key to that door is some first hand acquaintance with life. Music has no other subject matter than itself, but literature has life for its content, and to find one's way about in it, we must recognize what it is dealing with. Life is a music already composed. It has been here a long time, and had become already an ancient history when the first poets began to play upon it. They merely said for us the things we had been vainly feeling after, they brought out the colors our eyes had almost missed, they define sharply the flavors and the half tastes that had haunted us. The amateurs in the audience listen spell-bound when the master plays to perfection a piece they have struggled with; this is more to them than the loveliest of new sonatas, for it is their own world in a better light. So mankind will listen to the authentic poet who completes their half-realized selves; and will say of him, somewhat with the woman of Samaria, "He told me all the things that ever I did."

If the audience enjoy the music best when they have tried to play it themselves, they love it next best when they have heard it often, and they like it least, sometimes not at all, when they hear it for the first time. The reader likes poetry best when he has lived what it interprets; next best when he has heard often of the adventures it renders; least, even to the point of detestation, when he never entered that region of life at all, not even by hearsay. In such a predicament the real ground of his objection to the art is that it is original, at least so far as he is concerned, but the experience of his discomfort will hide the cause of it from him; not himself but the art will seem to him inadequate—is he not as much alive as anyone ever was? The book, he will say, portrays a world that is dead. Let us start fresh and be original; let us portray my world.

## II

In the slow fermentation of human societies, as fresh elements work their way to the top and for a time give their flavor to history, the new arrival is likely to herald himself in some such terms

in a protest against the art which, because he has as yet no share in it, seems to him old and worn out, and in a cry for original expression which to those with a longer memory of the world will be quite familiar. There have been new arrivals before, and their wish to start fresh is the cause rather than the result of decadence. For it is only in a figure of speech that art declines or prospers—it is the artists who are less competent or more so than their predecessors, and the poet who tells us that the period before him is at an end, is really proclaiming that he cannot improve upon it, and if the other poets are like himself, the preceding period is indeed ended. There is no other reason why the great moments of literature were not prolonged. Shakespeare was better than his predecessors, but he was not perfection; why did not the drama continue to develop? Ben Jonson, being himself a new arrival, and being, for all his book learning, outside the spiritual regions which Elizabethan drama had mainly portrayed, thought of course that a new kind of art was needed. He is in danger now of sharing the ignominy of all writers who coming after greater men pay homage through jealousy. Tennyson was not the greatest of poets; why did not his successors treat him as though he were a Greene or a Marlowe, and make Shakespearean improvements in him? To hear the critics of today rail against his art, one might suppose he had hopelessly damaged the language by using it, or that rhyme and meter had come to a bad end at his hands. The poet who talks this way about his predecessors is never the one who is conscious of the power to swallow them up. If Shakespeare had been a little man, he would have taken one look at Marlowe's *Faustus*, and given up the Elizabethan drama as a creaking and antiquated machine for moral doctrine. Had he been really ignorant of the long-stored-up energies and impulses which were coming to action in his marvellous hour, had he lacked the instinct to recognize them even when badly expressed, and to express them better, he might have walked the streets of London as the oriental arrival walked in Athens, or as the invader from the north walked in Rome—with a conviction that the day of this sort of thing was over. Nothing would remain but to be original.

If the clamor for originality is strong in the United States, it is,

perhaps, because here are many arrivals, and the newcomer not infrequently desires us to change our ways in the interest of his comfort. We have so much good will toward him, and we are so conscious of the fine things the various races may bring to our commonwealth, that we usually hesitate to speak frankly of his qualifications as writer or critic. He often brings a rare aptitude for art, and frequently he desires to write, but writing is the one art where his ignorance of life will handicap him. In painting an eye for color, in music an ear for tone and harmony, may carry him through, but in literature he will write in an acquired language, and even if it were his native tongue, in literature his attitude toward the art will be conditioned by his knowledge of life. He will perhaps assert rather vigorously that his knowledge is superior; has he not borne hardships and risen above them? Those who have not suffered, he will say, know nothing of life. He will think you cold-blooded if you tell him the better way to say it—that those who have not suffered, know nothing of suffering. If he desires to write the literature of suffering, he is probably competent, but since he is usually a person of strong energy, with a constructive temperament, he does not wish to write merely the literature of suffering, nor does he usually wish his children to repeat his hardship, though he may have said that only by such discipline comes knowledge. He usually desires to write about the world in general, as everyone would write, and for this task he usually has had experience too meagre or too special. It is only in the United States, after his arrival, that he most often makes his first contact with the older literature—not of America but of his own land; if he has had the experience necessary for understanding it, he absorbs it eagerly, but if his hardships in his fatherland deprived him of the necessary equipment, he will announce that the old literature is played out and meaningless. He is like the native students in South African schools, who may read the skating episode in Wordsworth's *Prelude*, but cannot get the shiver of the ice or the scratch of the steel runners. Those who have been with us for several generations and who through economic or other causes have missed that rich acquaintance with life which would explain what the great writers talk about, are likely to join the most recent comer in a plea for

originality. Their fortunes are to be pitied, but their advice in art is hardly to be followed. No amount of sympathy or admiration for them as human beings will accredit them as critics, for art is long, as we have heard, and the approaches to it are long also; though we may teach democracy fast enough to win our vote after five years, we must know at first hand youth and maturity, and have a suspicion of what old age is like, in the world the poet writes of, before we can give a fair opinion whether he has written well. But if the newcomer recovers here the adventure of life which his hardships cheated him of in the old country, he will find that the great literature of the world represents that adventure faithfully and vitally; it is merely a question of patience with him, since he is energetic and the upturn of the new world is exciting, and it is hard for him to believe that the old shadows in art of a life he has not yet lived will ever again take living form or pulse again in his imagination.

A new world, a new life, a new art. This is the sequence his hopes dwell on, though every term in it is debatable. Is there a new world, or a new life, or a new art? Sometimes we are told that in a new world life must automatically be new, but the doctrine is not convincing, for at other times we are summoned to originality, as to another duty, by the argument that in a new world we ought to be ashamed to lead still an old life. Sometimes we hear that a new life inevitably means a new art, and we reflect that if life now differs from what it once was, we need take no thought for our originality, for we shall be different in spite of ourselves; even by the old methods art will achieve something new; if we would write of love, for example, we need only tell the truth about the passion as we know it, and since the love we know is like nothing that ever was on sea or land, our romance will be like nothing that ever was in song or story. Why all this fret about it? And if religion and war and sorrow and death are all by hypothesis quite other than they once were, how can we escape originality when we report them in the setting of the new world and the new life? But the fact is that those who call for originality in art are not quite sure, after all, that the age is a new one—they would feel safer if some further vestiges of the past could be obliterated; and though they justify a new art by speaking much



of their new life, it is far from clear that they really think life is new, or at heart desire it to be so. Social and political systems, yes—but life? Horrible indeed is the vision of an absolutely original career for one who loves his fellows and prefers to take his experience outside a madhouse. “Your prayer is answered,” says the original Apollo, touching the original poet’s ears, trembling with originality: “you will have always a new cadence and a new idea; neither the language nor the substance of your communications will ever have occurred before in human experience. Your art will be unique and solitary. Nothing that men have done before will you condescend to repeat—neither to sleep, nor to eat, nor to travel, nor to know passion, pain, suffering or peace.” The poet, lured by the prophecy, might think at last that he had achieved fame, but Apollo would be there to remind him that his was like no fame achieved before—not like Shelley’s or Shakespeare’s. He might lose his heart, and in the throes of love might fancy he knew at last the meaning of Romeo’s story or Tristram’s, but the god would remind him that his was a special kind of love, not like the very ancient impulse that moved the sun and the other stars.

We need some divine reminder that our true desire is to realize in ourselves the best of old experience—not to find an original life, but to bring on the stage once more as far as possible the old procession of passions, sorrows and delights. The latest of us hopes he is not too late to taste for himself the high flavor of life which those before him talked so much about. If falling in love is a business incidental to adolescence, yet it is immensely hastened by our reading and by what we have heard; those whom the passion does not touch usually worry about their immunity instead of being thankful for it, and anything is better than never to have loved at all. It is not passion entirely that fills the hearts of the lovers brought at last to each other’s arms; at least, the single thought with which the two hearts beat may be a triumphant “Now I know for myself”. Similarly, however strange it may seem, we welcome sorrow and suffering, or we feel ourselves cheated rather than blest if none of it comes our way. Death, too, is less unwelcome than it might fairly be. At least those who faced it and have been reprieved, often remember that

a satisfaction in knowing the worst took some of the terror away. There it was at last, the old shadow that waylays us all.

Desiring to discover for ourselves the well known and traditional experience, we desire at the same time a more excellent version of it than our predecessors have enjoyed. We would love as Romeo did, but we like to think that Romeo never loved so well, and ours is a more wonderful Juliet. Even our sorrows will be greater, if we have our way, for in the intensity with which we explore the old experiences we feel rightly that we ought to equal or surpass other men. We dread the operation for appendicitis, before we undergo it; then we reach the point of satisfaction in finding out for ourselves what the operation is like; then finally we are persuaded that the operation was unusually severe, the worst of its kind. This is the artist in us, trying for distinction. And if with the old material of life we seek the distinction of excellence of statement, our motive is not simply a desire to surpass others, nor a desire to indicate progress, but often it is the hope to report the experience once for all. Art has always a dying part in it, as artists well know—some part which must constantly be restored by restatement. Try as he may to express only permanent things, the artist will include something that is aside from the main purpose, that goes out of date. Of course if an artist deliberately strives to be contemporary, and succeeds, his work to that extent will shortly become unintelligible; later poets will then try their hand at refurbishing or restoring the essential thing in the picture, and incidentally, without meaning to, they will include some contemporary and insignificant material of their own, which in time may precipitate another revision. What we call classics are the lucky masterpieces in which the permanent elements are so many and the transitory so few, that it seems useless and impertinent to revise them.

### III

The desire for originality is not new, and explanations of it are old. Some of them are based on the supposed working of the artistic temperament. The artist, it is said, craves expression at all costs, and if the craving is not satisfied in one direction, it will reach in another. If we cannot pour all of our energy into our

painting or our music, we may express the surplus in long hair and flowing cravat. This explanation, even if it were true, would imply that the artist desires notoriety rather than expression, for you cannot express yourself unless you speak a language your audience already knows, but eccentricity, which is the extreme form of originality, will attract attention even if it is not understood. But artists are not likely to admit that this theory does justice to their temperament. They will remark that few of the greatest masters have been eccentric in their appearance, none of them in their subject-matter. Like other men they fitted the society in which their lot fell, except that they had a genius for feeling life more vitally than other men. So many of them, like Chaucer or Shakespeare or Scott, cultivated the art of living close to their fellows and sharing an average fate, that we half suspect the less gifted would do the same if they could; for the artist who is original in dress or manners is not likely to meet human nature in its normal state—rather, his neighbors will whisper when he appears, and nudge each other, and he will never see what manners they use toward those who are not queer. Poets with an original or eccentric subject-matter meet the same fate. Could Poe or Baudelaire learn anything about us if they came among us with a reputation for the abnormal? Would we not unconsciously close to them our usual impulses, in our curiosity to observe their strangeness? To the artist who loves life in the sane way of a Chaucer, a Montaigne, a Molière such a welcome would be calamitous; rather hide anything that distinguishes him from others, even the fact that he can write, if by this caution he may draw closer to his sensitive race, and observe the undisturbed mystery and beauty of natural life.

Indeed, the whole question of originality, this desire for novelty, is in the end a question of our love of life. In the moments when we love life passionately we are not likely to get too much of it, and we do not ask to exchange it for another kind. When art and politics were creative, in the heyday of writers, painters, architects and statesmen who later seem to us almost solitary in their excellence, there was still no taking thought to be original; they fell in love, rather, with the obvious. Columbus made no voyage in search of originality—simply there had been too

many hints and rumors for him to stay at home any longer. Some very original spirits, we may suppose, took no stock in his expedition. For Shakespeare or Molière play-writing was an obvious task, and an old one; they may have expected to do successfully what others had only tried, but except for the success they aimed at nothing new. Where great poets have spoken on the matter themselves, their point of view is quite clear. At the end of the *Vita Nuova* Dante announced his hope to write of Beatrice such things as had never been written of any woman. Not to write a new kind of book, for women had been praised before, as he implied, and there had been poems of vision and pilgrimages through hell; but his hope was to excel. He determined to speak no more of his blessed lady until he could praise her worthily, and to praise such a woman worthily would be to write such things as had been written of no other. In the same mood Milton promised his great epic—in passionate love of the best before him, and in the assurance of doing as well or better—"I began thus to assent both to them and divers of my friends here at home, and not less to an inward prompting, which now grew daily upon me, that by labour and intense study, which I take to be my portion in this life, joined with the strong propensity of nature, I might leave something so written to after-times as they should not willingly let it die." This is the great manner of the poets. But in the opening words of Rousseau's *Confessions*, to take an opposite example, we have the accent of the modern disease; he would undertake, he said, an enterprise of which there had never been a parallel, and of which there would be no imitation—he would tell the truth about one man, about himself. He promised no excellence except the uniqueness of the subject, for truth-telling, though always desirable, can hardly be important unless the subject is worth while.

Rousseau's book is great in spite of its introductory sentence; his subject after all was not unique, for each of us can follow his example and write at least one book about ourselves; and perhaps he told less of the unvarnished truth than he intended, for being an artist in every fiber of his body, he selected from his experience not his most singular adventures, but his adventures in those realms of experience—in sex, for example—which his readers

were surest to understand and find interesting. But with his famous announcement, whether or not he followed it, our malady began. Hence all the poems and novels of autobiography, all the diaries of young men and maidens, old men and children, all the bouquets of verse still showered upon us in which the poet confides his, more often her, intimate symptoms. In all this there is little to remind us of great art, or of the times in which great art has been made; the resemblance is rather to a hospital or an old folks' home, where the inmates find importance in the fact that they have been there longer than their fellows, or are younger, or a little less blind and deaf. Hence also our difficulty in understanding earlier literature, of a date when not originality but excellence was the aim. When we first read Shakespeare's sonnets or Sidney's, we conclude with satisfaction that the poet was writing out of his heart, in the Rousseau fashion. But when we learn that these stories are works of art, dramatic renderings of life, and that the "I" who speaks in the lines is first of all the hero of the story, whether or not he is the poet too; and when we learn further that much of the material is adapted from earlier poets, used over again as we use old words to make up new sentences—then perhaps our respect for the master vanishes, our ideal is cracked; they were not such original poets after all. It is the defect of our taste. We forget that the oldest phrases, if they have the poetic excellence of being true to all of us, are renewed and become personal in the adventure of each individual. Though Job ought to get the credit, by all modern standards, of uttering that very original profession of faith, "I know that my redeemer liveth," yet the words were too full of possible meanings to remain linked with Job's private misfortunes; being already immortal, they seem never to have been said for a first time. Lover after lover has found in his own passion the meaning of some old song, perhaps "My love is like the red, red rose", which until the passion fell on him seemed sentimental and silly. And Rousseau himself in the *Confessions*, at the very outset of his egotism, of his originality, of his indecorous opposing of the individual to the race, records his boyhood love of an old folk-song—precisely the kind of art from which his doctrine led us away.

But nowadays the desire for originality comes not only from the writer; a certain class of readers also demand it, the kind of person who reads with an eye out for imitations and plagiarisms. That plot has been used before, he says, when two men are in love with the same woman—or, that character is copied from so-and-so, when Pierrot's father forgives the returning prodigal. There are reviewers of this type also, who read their victims into categories, calling this poet Tennysonian, that novelist Meredithian, that essayist Emersonian. Such categories become less definite as we read back into the past, for over the range of a few centuries no plot is new, nor does any writer seem altogether unlike the others. There is such a thing as plagiarism, yet unless one is a fanatic for originality, the question of plagiarism is of no great importance; the world is not interested, and if the author is concerned from whom the play or the plot is stolen, his concern is more for his property than for his art. If his work is stolen unchanged, it is still as good art as it was before; if the thief has mangled it, his plagiarized version will not be so good as the authentic text; but if by luck he has improved on what he took, it becomes his, bag and baggage, so far as fame is concerned. Who were the authors of those songs Burns made over into his masterpieces? Who were those dramatists and chroniclers whom Shakespeare rewrote? The names in many cases can be looked up, but they are of no account. The world feels that the great writer conferred a benefit by improving on the earlier work. What is far more important, the world also feels that the great writer, in improving on another man's work, actually invaded no private rights, for the material of literature is life, and life is no one's private property. After the invention of printing, writers saw the possibility of financial dividends from their works, and plagiarism is an aspect of this financial question, but it has otherwise nothing to do with art. The world in general continues to think of art in the old way, as creation rather than as business, and it quite properly cares little who does the creating, or who afterwards receives a money reward. What were Homer's annual earnings? Or was it really Homer? Or who besides David wrote his psalms? We know instinctively that these questions are trivial.

But imitation in art is often more apparent than real. If a

poet is in touch with his age, he will write of the subjects that interest him, and other poets in touch with the age will also write about what interests them, and consequently they may all write of much the same thing; they are not imitating each other, but they are enjoying a common pleasure, to which one of them may have shown the way. We often say that the popular writer is trying to catch the favor of the public by giving it what it likes, and in some instances he may be calculating and his motives unworthy. But it is more probable that being typical of his age, he simply likes the same things as his fellows. The Elizabethan Londoner liked historical plays; did Shakespeare write them only to please his audience, or rather did he not share the general taste? The principle here implied will explain why any poets who have an enormous popularity will have also an enormous so-called influence. They are popular because they share the people's taste, and the people therefore find in their work what they like; but if their subject-matter is so popular, many others will be writing of it too. The resulting resemblance is not really an influence, or rarely is; it is a contemporary tendency. The poet who is best in the lot will be remembered. All ran, but one receives the prize. However, those who came in second and third are neither imitators nor plagiarists.

#### IV

To submit oneself to the impersonal discipline of art is hard for the young. Few young writers are lured into the profession by the impossibility of being original in their craft, or by the excellent chance their best works have of becoming anonymous with time. We can imagine them pleading for the rights of their personalities; what on earth did the old pagan mean by his proud *non omnis moriar*, if his personality was not to survive in his work? For their comfort let us add that personality in art is indestructible. If we have any of it, it will live. And if we mean personality when we say originality, thinking of the author rather than of his subject, then we may add also that genuine personality is original in spite of itself. How hard it is to tell a story twice the same way; how difficult to form anything permanent, even habits; how impossible to get once for all into a rut. A dull lecture, though we

hear it a second time word for word, is subtly changed, for we no longer hear it the first time, and "afflictions induce callosities", as Sir Thomas Browne said, and "sorrows destroy us or themselves". The record we buy for our phonograph, though we liked it at first, may empty itself with each repetition, till the charm is gone; even the photograph of our dear ones, framed on the wall, has a tendency at last to merge itself in the wall paper. Whatever is repeated in our consciousness becomes mechanical and unnoticed, or the edge of it is blunted. To restore the sharp edges of impression, to bring back the first flavor of things, is the ideal of life and of art; only strong personality can do it, but where such a personality comes, it is irresistible and undisguisable. It shows up best in those attitudes of life which in other hands have grown drab and sordid; the contrast brings out the genius. This kind of success in life is the art of the actor who plays a long run, and who gives even in the one hundredth performance the impression of a fresh experience. A poorer actor would have needed a new play long before. Or we might say that art is a summary of life—and where will personality show itself sooner than in summarizing? When Lafcadio Hearn lectured to his Japanese students, he followed the reading of each English poem by a brief paraphrase in prose, which usually is the most precious part of his criticism; for in the retelling, his personality emphasized what he liked in the verses. If we could ask Tennyson, Morris, Browning, Arnold and Meredith each to write out a summary of something we all know, we should have five criticisms, and five revelations of personality. And there are more personalities in the world than we may realize; only they waste themselves in the search for the original, when all that is needed is to be sincere.

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